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John Dean: Artful Shover

He Concedes Sins but Lashes Back, Sunnily

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Behind the sunny smile and the pin-striped veneer, John Dean emerges as a pretty tough character in the Watergate drama.

He started out a little uptight yesterday, popping lozenges for his sore throat. Shortly, however, it was clear to him and everyone else in the Senate Caucus Room

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that the interrogators of the Watergate committee were not going to push John Dean around.

Instead, he did some artful shoving of his own. The Republican counsel, Fred D. Thompson, was warming up to some nasty questions aimed at Dean's credibility.

"I hope I am not appearing to be badgering you in any way," Thompson said solicitously, "but I am sure you understand that your actions and motivations are relevant."

John Dean smiled agreeably and gave Thompson a verbal elbow in the eye.

"If I were still at the White House," he said, "I would probably be feeding you the questions to ask the person who is sitting here."

Thompson mumbled amid the general laughter that he didn't have to be fed questions by anyone. But the insinuation of White House puppetry threw him off balance and he never quite recovered.

In his first day under questioning, John Dean was the badger, gracefully conceding his major sins and sloughing off others, embellishing his self-portrait of a trusted presidential aide who witnessed crime in the Oval Office and would tell all.

Who's lying? John Dean or President Nixon? With a mildly melodramatic flourish, the witness agreed that the entire business boils down to that question.

"I realize," said Dean, "it is almost an impossible task if it one against the other, that I am up against."

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Indeed, he hinted darkly at a concerted effort to destroy his character, including lurid gossip and private investigations. "Every conceivable inch of my life has been gone over," he said.

Still, he managed to convey to his audience yesterday that he is not intimidated by the match, an expression of self-confidence which bolstered his side of the contest.

How could the senators ever judge between Dean and Mr. Nixon, Sen. Joseph Montoya (D-N.M.) asked.

"I have one ally only," said Dean, "and that's the truth as I know it."

Despite the firmness of his performance yesterday, the contest over Dean's story isn't decided yet. This morning he appears before the committee again and perhaps tougher questioning, from Republicans like Gurney of Florida and Baker of Tennessee than he faced yesterday. He has already given them an elbow too by revealing that the White House regards Gurney as a sure patsy and Baker as a maybe.

The questioning yesterday was so loose that it made Dean's answers seem all the more precise.

Montoya, for instance, started out reviewing the seven-point defense statement issued by President Nixon last month, a document with which Dean was obviously familiar. By point No. 3, Montoya's mind had wandered to something else and Dean had to direct him back to the subject of his questions.

At another point, Thompson interrupted his answer. "I'm getting to that," Dean said coolly, and proceeded at his own pace to complete the answer.

His manner was, likewise, self-confident as they tested his memory independent of the 245-page written statement he had read all day Monday. Dean not only remembered the story well enough, but occasionally straightened out a senator lost in the tangle of dates and names.

Up close, the young lawyer has a pinched expression on his face, narrow eyes and a brow which furrows easily, smiling or frowning. He is 34 years old with a streak of young blond in front, but gray thistles are also beginning to show around the sideburns and there is a thin spot, too.

He spoke with his hands occasionally, more often as he became more confident. The sunny grin, which shows Bucky Beaver overbite, was frequent, even when he was discussing the adversity of his present situation.

Though Dean was largely unscarred yesterday, he did suffer on several personal points. When Sen. Herman

Talmadge asked him about why he got fired from his first job as a lawyer, Dean read a long letter of explanation that didn't seem to refute the accusation of double-dealing.

When committee counsel Samuel Dash asked about his dipping into the secret stash of campaign money, Dean's explanation was a bit puny. He said he didn't want any of that cash in his control being used for hush money, a rare gesture of reluctance for Dean.

But the President suffered too, thanks to Dean's careful account of the small details which make a witness seem more believable. He remembered, for instance, the crucial meeting with Mr. Nixon last Sept. 15 when he says he realized,

for the first time, that the President knew a cover-up was under way.

President Nixon, said Dean, congratulated him for his good work in containing the case, keeping the indictments from reaching upward on the White House and campaign staffs. How could Dean be sure the President knew?

"I couldn't imagine him complimenting me if he didn't know what he was complimenting me for," Dean replied.

In a meeting like that, the former presidential counsel explained, "It's very easy to tell if you're talking on the same wave length with a man, and certainly there was no doubt in my mind that we were on the same wave length."