

Dean Made It Look Easy

By Christopher Lydon
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Washington

This was supposed to be his roughest test, answering a barrage of questions prepared by the White House and facing the heavyweights of the Senate Watergate committee: Senator Sam Ervin Jr., the Democratic chairman, and Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., the vaguely menacing Republican vice chairman.

But John W. Dean III — as crisply cool-looking in a new brown suit as earlier in tans, blues and grays — made it look easy.

He admitted at one point yesterday morning that he had been "extremely nervous" even in a cordial meeting with President Nixon last summer — a startling confession from the young lawyer who easily keeps senators at bay with his cocksure, just-the-facts and don't-tread-on-me manner.

One measure of Dean's mastery was that when Ervin drew his testimony into what sounded like a charge of constitutional malfeasance against President Nixon, Dean, after baiting that judgment for four days, modestly declined to comment.

"I would rather be excused from drawing my own conclusion on that," he said; adding inevitably — or was it teasingly? — "at this point in time."

Believe

Baker, usually chary of drawing conclusions from the evidence, seemed to lay down his arms in the middle of his questioning of Dean. "I believe the thrust of your testimony," Baker said, almost casually. If indeed he sticks to that belief, the defense of President Nixon now falls to a single committee member, Senator Edward J. Gurney of Florida.

The third Republican, Senator Lowell P. Weicker of Connecticut, has been gleefully stirring up evidence against the President for weeks and exploded yesterday with a passionate blast at White House "pressure."

Before Baker came to the Senate in 1967 he was an esteemed defense lawyer in eastern Tennessee. Courtroom buffs around Scott county flocked to hear his speeches before juries. He became known as "two to ten Baker" for the short sentences he wangled for defendants in the grisliest murder trails.

At the start of his questions yesterday, Baker seemed to be putting Dean on notice of his skills. Please answer questions "yes" or "no" before explaining, Baker instructed. He said he wanted to "focus" Dean's charges against the President, and to "organize" his testimony for him.

"The central question," Baker said — insisting he did not mean to dismiss the host of intriguing peripheral questions — "is what did the President know? And when did he know it?"

But Dean sailed comfortably under the new line of questioning and seemed actually to welcome the chance to offer a few new details about the meeting in the Oval Office last September 15, from which time he dates Mr. Nixon's knowledge of the Watergate cover-up.

He remembered the time of the meeting — late afternoon — and the chair he sat in — to the right of the President's desk. He even recalled that Mr. Nixon had delayed a trip somewhere to meet with him — adding meaningful weight; as it seemed to Dean, to the President's gratitude for his counsel's service in blocking

indictment of White House figures.

Dean granted that his evidence of Mr. Nixon's early knowledge was circumstantially based on his familiarity with White House procedures and specifically on the working assumption that H. R. Haldeman told the President everything important that other staff members told him.

Yet Baker was ready to grant, too, that Dean had shown an expert's knowledge of how the Nixon White House worked.

Questions

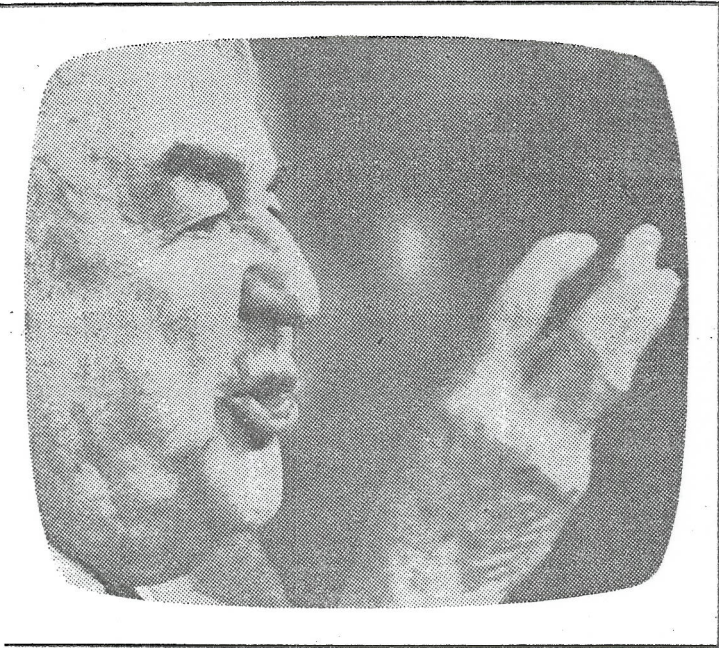
"You have been a remarkable witness," Baker said at least twice.

The job of reading 40-odd questions from the White House was handed to Senator Daniel K. Inouye, the Hawaii Democrat. Inouye's resonant baritone gave the questions their full rhetoric force but he gave the White House no help in following up Dean's answers.

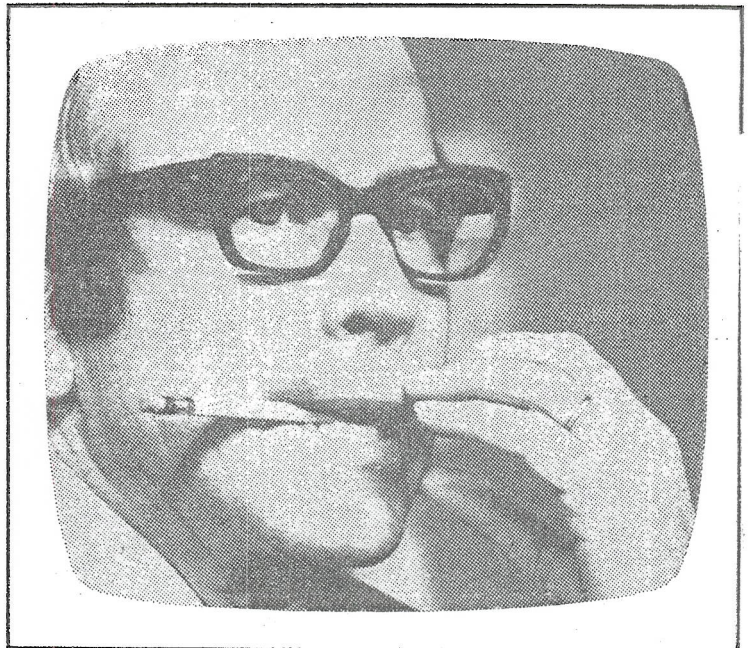
The heart of the White House examination seemed to be: Why, if the President was aware of the cover-up on September 15, did Dean feel the need to tell Mr. Nixon the facts at the end of February? And, if, as Dean said again yesterday, Mr. Nixon "didn't understand the implications" of the plot at the end of February, how could he have known the truth last summer?

It was at that point that Dean told how nervous he had been in his first "one-on-one" session with the President last September. But he did not respond directly to the White House's question, and Inouye proceeded automatically to the next item on the list.

At the end of his fourth long day on the witness stand, John Dean's ordeal was not over. But he had "run the gantlet" past the full cast of Senate interrogators, dented his confidence in the last.



Ervin: It sounded like a charge of malfeasance



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Baker: He got down to the central question