

# The 'Why' of Watergate

What on earth is it for? This is the question that every member of the former White House staff ought to have asked himself, at every step along the road that led to the Watergate horror. If they had done this—and had also been sensible, politically experienced men, which they were not—there would have been no horror.

In an odd way, this is the horror's most horrible aspect. Crimes were committed, which cannot be forgiven. But what for? To burglarize Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, and to listen to Lawrence O'Brien's telephone! That is the approximate sum of the answer. Damfool criminality is hard to swallow.

Others will perhaps say that there was a dark design to change the political system. But if there was such a design in the first place, the people in charge were such bungling fools that their design threatened no one but themselves. In the second place, one must add, only innocents pretend there was no seamy side of other, more admired White Houses of the past.

These are the first reflections that suggest themselves, after John W. Dean III has said his say. If you made the least effort to look beyond the smooth manner and the "sincere" exterior, Dean seemed a nastier, sleazier figure with each day on the stand. It is already evident, too, that he has at least bent the truth pretty badly for his own purposes.

There are two other witnesses, for example, to the crucial conversation Dean had on June 17, after the Watergate break-in, with ex-Attorney General Richard Kleindienst and his career-assistant, Henry E. Petersen. Both are honorable men.

Both remember that the critical moment in the conversation with Dean came when Kleindienst suggested that he ought to be called to the White House, so that the government's chief law officer could warn the President of the true seriousness of Watergate. Kleindienst wanted to advise the President to make a deep cut to get rid of the cancer. Dean smoothly replied, "No, that he would do it."

To begin with, this is not at all the picture of that conversation conveyed by Dean on the stand. To go on, it is clear that Dean's promise to the ex-attorney general was a lie. To complete

the obvious implications, Dean made no effort to "do it" because he did not want to do it. If he had wished to convey a warning to the President, and had feared doing so himself, he could have left the job for Kleindienst to do, instead of putting him off.

The fact of the matter, plain as a pikestaff on the face of the testimony, is that John Dean took the criminal course he followed, not innocently, not reluctantly, but eagerly and ambitiously. In the kind of White House Dean portrayed on the stand, he thought he could make a lot of brownie points by doing what he did. He would have made the opposite of brownie points, of course, by letting the former attorney general into the act. So he committed crimes for brownie points until he belatedly began to fear for his own skin.

That leaves the other, considerably more important fact of the matter: That the President of the United States stands charged by John Dean with complicity in crimes that are felonies under our law. In this reporter's old fashioned view, serious substantiation of Dean's charges—if such substantiation is forthcoming—will therefore require the President's resignation or impeachment.

But this, it appears, is as yet another minority view. Everything major about the President's involvement in the Watergate horror was said by Dean in his first day's testimony. After that, it was repetition or elaboration of damfoolery like the poisonously silly list of "enemies" some of the damfools in the White House kept . . . apparently as a kind of Walter Mitty-like exercise of their notions of politics, since no real results ensued.

Some of the testimony also makes one think of the anti-Catholic candidate in a Western state in the old days. He won with a single speech, which always had the same peroration: "Folks, if you don't elect me, they'll be practicing celibacy on the public streets." For these reasons, judgments after Dean's first day of testimony ought to be final judgments.

Yet Rep. Paul McCloskey of California not only entered the New Hampshire primary against President Nixon. He was also the first to raise the question of impeachment on the floor of

the House of Representatives. And Rep. McCloskey's comment on Dean's crucial first day of testimony was that there were "no grounds for impeachment based on John Dean's statements." No weightier member of Congress mentioned impeachment, either.

So here, again, we have the question, what on earth is it for? This time, the question applies to the Senate investigation. Unless the hearings are to lead to impeachment, they are merely destructive, at least so far as the President's personal role is concerned. This aspect should end just as soon as the other key witnesses can be heard.

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