

The Week of Mr. Dean

It is as well that the Senate Watergate hearings have been recessed for 10 days while Congress takes its Fourth of July break. The testimony of President Nixon's former counsel, John W. Dean III, was so overwhelming in both volume and complication that some time will be required to absorb its meaning as well as to isolate all the specific points to be tested against the evidence of others.

In the latter connection we would make two observations, both for what must be the hundredth time. The first is that the issues to be resolved by these hearings—the truth that is being sought—can in no respect be defined as simple questions concerning presidential and other official awareness of the fact that the Democrats' Watergate headquarters were to be burgled on June 17 of last year or even questions concerning the precise degree of presidential complicity in the cover-up of that crime. The second is that the quest for truth regarding White House collusion in all the many squalors, of which the Watergate burglary and cover-up are but one part, does not—as some seem to suppose—rest on making a simple choice between the veracity of, say, the President or H. R. Haldeman or Maurice Stans and Mr. Dean. Rather, it rests on the establishment of an enormous body of testimony and evidence, checked and cross-checked through the investigatory process whereby witnesses corroborate or cast doubt upon their own and one another's version of events. So it will yet be some while until the validity of Mr. Dean's account of particular actions and conversations can be judged.

Even so, a few things did begin to emerge from the Watergate murk and to take on fairly sharp outlines during his testimony—the magnitude and reach of the on-going conspiracy in its squalid details are among them. If that conspiracy—or continuing series of conspiracies—had any purpose, it seems merely to have been the maiming and discrediting of anyone who had the temerity to challenge the President on any grounds whatever. Opposition arguments were not to be answered: opponents were simply to be destroyed or punished. In the service of this profoundly anti-democratic ideal, anything went. So it was a world of burglary and bugging and lying and code-names and eyes-only secrecy and the use of supposedly apolitical agencies of the federal government to retaliate against individuals who got out of line. What is so chilling about all this—apart from the mere fact that it went on—is that the men we have seen so far who participated in it seem to have been entirely empty of any further purpose. You cannot argue with their larger public or governmental goal because they didn't have one. They seem to have viewed both the U.S. government and their own—Republican—party as little more than handy instruments to consolidate and enlarge their own authority.

Another no less troubling impression that was reinforced during the week of Mr. Dean's testimony was that the White House *even now*, has failed to understand what is wanted of it and that the President con-

tinues many of the practices that have been so thoroughly discredited by the exposures of recent weeks and months. Does Mr. Nixon have charge or does he not? Is he or is he not serious about wishing to get to the truth of these matters, about putting behind him the particular style of government that led to his present turmoil? There is, alas, more than plenty of evidence that these questions may be answered negatively. Only this past week did the public receive the White House memorandum attempting to discredit Mr. Dean, taking the side of Mr. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman in the dispute, hanging John Mitchell (without benefit of trial), exonerating the President and laying blame for the whole present crisis on Mr. Dean. Except—we were subsequently and hastily told—it wasn't a White House position. It was only a "hypothesis" of some kind, prepared by Fred Buzhardt who was brought over from the Pentagon a while back to serve as Mr. Nixon's counsel in this matter. It had been forwarded to the Senate committee, along with some questions for Mr. Dean, just as a possible way to challenge Mr. Dean's testimony. The President had not approved the document and thus it did not represent his account of what happened.

Well, what does? And, even more important, how can the President think at this late date that what is required of him and his office is tactical maneuvers? When *does* a White House paper, or act, represent the will or the word of the principal occupant of that house? Only up until it has been declared inoperative by Ronald Ziegler? The responsibility for the paper was Mr. Buzhardt's, we are told in response, since the President never cleared it. The President, in other words, *was not involved; he did not know*. "There need be no authorization from the President for any particular bit of discussion or business"—that is what White House spokesman Gerald Warren actually said. If you have not noticed a depressingly familiar ring to all this you have not been following Watergate.

Saying he does not know what has been or is going on in his name scarcely serves Mr. Nixon. Yet he has repaired repeatedly to this damning explanation. And as if he did not understand its implications and its consequences in real life, he has evidently sought to isolate himself further. One of the more striking facts that emerged from the week of the Dean testimony was that people on Capitol Hill and even in his own government seemed in a different way to be seeking to isolate him too. In the recent public remarks of some of his cabinet officers and now in the statements of Sen. Howard Baker, Sen. Lowell Weicker and others, one has got the impression that Republicans are beginning to isolate—that is, to separate out and encircle—the particular band of men who had been responsible for the conspiracy and to disassociate themselves and their party from them. The President himself is thus at great political risk. It defies the imagination to think how he can suppose that further isolation and retreat can serve him now.