

Remember John Dean?

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON—Only in America could President Nixon cling to power as his Administration is rocked by scandal. In any other self-governing nation, the parliament would months ago have called the head of government to account.

As the Watergate hearings resumed, however, politicians and commentators were saying that Mr. Nixon had safely ridden out the storm. That judgment was expressed despite these developments:

In New York, two former members of the Nixon Cabinet are about to go on trial on criminal charges.

In Washington, a special prosecutor is preparing indictments against several men who were formerly the President's most influential aides.

A grand jury is hearing evidence about the suspicious settlement of a major antitrust case in which the President himself participated.

The President is claiming "executive privilege" to shield from the courts a tape recording of a conversation in which he is alleged to have struck a deal with milk producers to raise their Government-guaranteed price in exchange for their political support.

The Vice President's staff is researching the precedents to see whether he can be indicted on criminal charges if he has not first been impeached.

While all this is going on, Mr. Nixon greets foreign visitors, deplors the drug traffic, and lectures Congress on its deficiencies. After nearly five months of sullen brooding and seclusion, the President is desperately pretending that normality is returning.

He is trying to give Watergate the same treatment he gave the Vietnam war. The war continued for more than four years, while 20,000 American soldiers went to their deaths and 50,000 suffered severe injuries. During that time, Mr. Nixon and his associates churned out propaganda that he was "winding down" the war, that "Vietnamization" was practically the same as peace, and that only crazy radicals and narrow-minded partisans doubted that while he was making war he was really making peace.

Now the country is being told that Watergate is a thing of the past, and that it is really—almost—practically over. The Administration's propaganda line is that it is backward-looking, destructive, divisive, almost impolite to bring the subject up. The

President says he is "turning the whole matter over to the courts" as if he had any choice in the matter. It was Judge Sirica who refused to accept the perjured testimony of the Administration witnesses in the first Watergate trial. It was the Senate that forced the appointment of a special prosecutor as the price of confirming a new Attorney General. The Watergate cases are in the courts because the President could not keep them out of the courts.

Before the Vietnamizing of Watergate proceeds further, it is worth recalling the grave accusations that John W. Dean leveled against Mr. Nixon last June. He testified that the President knew about the Watergate cover-up as early as September, 1972, and that the President was well aware of the offers of clemency and the payment of hush money to keep the original Watergate defendants from telling all that they knew. If true, this means that Mr. Nixon is guilty of obstruction of justice at the least.

Since the passage of time tends to make many people forget the specifics of the Dean testimony, it is useful to recall the immediate reactions last June of two commentators basically friendly to the President. The Wall Street Journal in an editorial on June 28 wrote: "Mr. Dean's account is quite enough for a prima facie case, to create the presumption of Presidential involvement, to shift the burden of proof to the White House."

Columnist Stewart Alsop wrote in Newsweek on July 9: "To continue to believe that President Nixon was wholly innocent of any involvement in the Watergate cover-up requires, by this time, a major act of faith. . . . If the pro-Nixon witnesses, or Mr. Nixon himself, can extricate the President from the web John Dean has woven, it will be a miracle."

No miracle has occurred. Instead of the detailed rebuttal that White House sources once promised, Mr. Nixon has resorted to his "leave it to the courts" dodge. The Wall Street Journal for a time backed away from its June 28 position but last week wearily concluded: "In terms of public opinion, the consensus is that while the President is guilty, further venting of the whole affair gets us nowhere."

But if this is the case and yet the matter is allowed to drop, what does that do to the moral image that Americans have of themselves and their country? The Watergate crimes are real crimes. Is the man accused of being the chief perpetrator of those crimes to go his way unchallenged?