

A Man Of Order In the Court

By William Gildea

When people talk about President Nixon's new Watergate counsel, James D. St. Clair, invariably they marvel at what a perfectly organized man he is.

He is. Precisely the first thing he did after getting off his flight from Boston Monday morning at National Airport was to make another round-trip reservation home this weekend.

"I've got this figured out," he said, standing at the ticket counter. "By the time I get my ticket here my bag will be ready right over there. I don't lose a step."

They say Perry Mason he isn't, no courtroom flamboyance about him. No, but a precisely prepared craftsman with lightning-quick courtroom maneuvers. In St. Clair's first hour in Judge John Sirica's courtroom, Leon Jaworski's prosecution team clearly recognized the arrival of a highly estimable adversary. Courtroom observers witnessed a new order in the President's bedraggled legal forces.

A \$200,000 earner at Boston's high-powered Hale & Dorr until now, St. Clair displays exactly no extravagance. He flies coach, as if he were a man of the people, and he is unnoticed by almost all.

What people don't talk about much are the sense of humor and ready laugh he displayed the other day to a reporter, possibly because they aren't well known compared to his more familiar courtroom demeanor, intense and sometimes so aggressive as to interrupt an answer in midsentence.

Interwoven with his good nature, according to his wife, Billie, is an ability to "turn almost anything into the bright side"—no small attribute in his current job. "When he hits a bad golf shot he'll say something like 'Well, that'll make somebody happy.'" He's not the kind of guy who's going to break his golf club over his knee.

In fact, Billie St. Clair said, she's only seen him get slightly mad once, and they'll be married 30 years in November. "We were driving to the first New England Patriots football game in Foxboro, when they just opened the stadium, and the traffic was terrible," she said. "We got up to the front of the stadium at the

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half. I didn't even know for a long time that he was mad. The others in the car did. When I realized it, I couldn't believe it."

Like everything else, St. Clair has worked at, keeping his cool. "In this profession, you sort of have to train yourself to remain under control," he said as the black government pool car moved out toward town.

This is how the 53-year-old, white-haired St. Clair has functioned since he was plucked by Hale & Dorr right out of Harvard Law School in 1947. Calmly but relentlessly, he has worked endless hours, shutting out all other aspects of life.

"Everything just drops away," he said, "and you concentrate solely on that. You try to find some sanctuary to avoid as many interruptions as possible."

When not in court, he works until 7 or 8 o'clock at night in the Executive Office Building, takes most of his meals alone at his hotel, then retires to his room to read, much of it concerning Watergate. "Great life, huh," he said, smiling.

"As much as six months ago I said, just casually, to some friends, that the President ought to get Jim St. Clair," said John G. Adams, the former Army counsel who hired the late Joseph Welch as special counsel during the 1954 McCarthy hearings. St. Clair worked at Welch's side the whole time.

"The White House must see this as a long road. They must be looking way down the pike. If it comes to an impeachment proceeding, some lawyer is going to have to represent the President on the floor of the Senate and St. Clair is this type of guy. He has 25 years' experience on the floors of the courts."

Not unlike almost every lawyer who knows St. Clair, Adams grades the man highly, calling him "a very decent fellow, a man of high principle, imperturbable, unflappable, very thorough, a real artist at being prepared for any eventuality."

Like all but one Boston lawyer, who viewed St. Clair as having "an eye on the cash register" and wondered why he'd taken the job at a comparatively modest salary of \$42,500, Adams discounted St. Clair's sharp drop in income as any restraint in signing on at the White House.

"If this becomes a trial," said Adams, "it would be the trial of the century. Many lawyers would be willing to do it for nothing."

"It'd be a chance for a footnote in history," suggested a Watergate prosecutor's office spokesman. In the opposite camp, the feeling is apparent that St. Clair is the best man Mr. Nixon has hired, a man with a reputation not only for thoroughness but skill in the courtroom.

"He has very complete preparation," said Lewis Weinstein, a Boston lawyer who, as has St. Clair since 1955, teaches trial practice at Harvard Law

School. "He makes very extensive outlines, which can be referred to in court.

"Secondly, he has an amazing capacity to phrase a question properly. He has an instinctive way of knowing when a question is objectionable.

"And he's always a gentleman in court," Weinstein added. "You know when he's involved it will be a non-nonsense trial, a clean trial. No dirty pool from him."

Another Boston lawyer, who has faced St. Clair in court, Robert Meserve, a past president of the American Bar Association, who said he has "bent an elbow—very occasionally" with St. Clair, declared he didn't "keep track" of the outcomes in cases. "I can't afford to," he laughed, adding, "I've lost cases to him and won some from him. One thing, you never win because he defaults. I don't think he's ever surrendered an inch of his client's position."

That St. Clair "has not been a cause man," as Weinstein put it, has led to the only significant criticism of the man in the past. Putting it as succinctly as anyone, Yale Chaplain Rev. William Sloane Coffin, a former St. Clair client, was quoted by Jessica Mitford in "The Trial of Dr. Spock" as saying, "The trouble with St. Clair is that he is all case and no cause."

In a way, history has repeated itself for St. Clair. It's been almost exactly 20 years since he came down from Boston to serve as assistant counsel for the Army, under Welch.

Too businesslike to be caught up in small ironies, St. Clair says, "There's a little bit of nostalgia, but not very much." He talked of the different location of his office, the different people he's working with. In short, he isn't looking back.

But his personal life is much the same as it was when he was here in the Army-McCarthy days. His wife is back home. Every night, without fail, he calls her. He hustles back on weekends.

"It's a good idea," he said. "It clears the thinking processes to get home a little bit." And what does he do there? Well, last Saturday, first thing, he got a physical exam. "I had to replace my group insurance with the firm with my own insurance," he said, adding that the doctor pronounced him physically fit. "I was pleased to have him say that," he said, again laughing.

The rest of last Saturday he spent "running errands" and, in the evening, playing duplicate bridge with friends. He "did a little telephoning" over the weekend on the Watergate case and "read over the brief we filed last week."

Work, in recent years, has cut his time for relaxation almost to nothing. Recent cases he has handled in Boston have "consumed a great deal of time," he said, and he does not get to his summer home on the Cape, in Chatham, nearly as much as he would like, especially in the off season, when it's not crowded.

In 30 years, says his wife, "you work up a tolerance" for his work



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"There's a little bit of nostalgia, but not much," says James D. St. Clair of his return to Washington, this time to serve as the President's lawyer.

schedule. "Even when he's home he works two or three nights a week, and he has been," she said. "It's always one thing or another. Sometimes he'll say he'll be home at 8:30 and I just laugh. I know it'll be 10:30. The nights before any kind of trial, he has to see that everything's absolutely, totally ready." Then there's the firm meeting every Thursday night. "Absolutely," she emphasized, every Thursday night.

When recently he tried to take a Christmas-to-New Year's vacation at a Florida resort near Tampa, he was interrupted in the very first minute of the holiday by a call from Gen. Alexander Haig, the White House chief of staff. The phone was ringing when St. Clair walked into the room. Shortly he was off to San Clemente to meet the President.

Though many people still can't understand why, St. Clair promptly accepted the Nixon offer, ignoring the sad fates of earlier presidential lawyers. The reason, he seemed to be saying, was that it would be good for his career, because something much bigger wasn't likely to come along.

"One reason, I was asked," he said. "And I think professionally it's got to be a matter of importance and significant interest to me and, as far as I can see, everybody."

That is as close as St. Clair comes to discussing the case. He declared "inappropriate, because it pertains to the case" a question about how often he sees the President.

He is almost as tight-lipped about his politics. A registered Republican, he said he "might vote Republican most of the time but not necessarily all of the time," adding, politely but firmly, "We'll end the questions on that right there."

Asenath (Billie) St. Clair is a quick-to-laugh, likeable woman, a conclusion reached before she persuaded her publicity-shy husband to grant an interview. A newspaperwoman before her marriage, she apparently understands the need for such things. She once wrote a column for the Long Beach (Calif.) Independent called "Incidentally," by Billie Nestle.

It was in Long Beach, where she grew up, that Billie Nestle met James St. Clair, serving in the Navy aboard Patrol Craft 777 based at San Pedro, Calif., during the war. His law school studies had been interrupted after the first year. She spent two years at UCLA, the next two at USC.

"We fell in love quickly," she said. "We were married a year and a half later. I had to be absolutely sure. He was intelligent and I was looking for somebody intelligent. He was very good looking. Big brown eyes. Dark hair. He was very brown from being out on the water."

The St. Clairs now live in a five-bedroom, five-bath colonial home on one of the hills in fashionable Wellesley Hills. There is a swimming pool and a pool table and the place is surrounded by trees. "We're very comfortable.

very lucky, very lucky," Billie St. Clair said.

They have three children: Peggy, 24, a graduate of Tufts who will finish law school at Boston College in the spring; Scott, 20, a junior at Gettysburg College, and Tommy, 16, a sophomore at the Belmont Hills (Mass.) School. Scott describes his father as "open minded," adding that he has "come around a little bit" on subjects that separate generations.

Going to work for the President is by far the most important assignment in a law career St. Clair was drawn to by circumstances. As he said, "My grandfather was a lawyer and a judge in Ohio. My uncle was a lawyer." Also, there was another uncle a lawyer, and two lawyer aunts.

"Certainly by the time I was in college I decided to go to law school," St. Clair said. He spent his first two college years at Augustana in Rock Island, Ill., mostly because he was living close by at the time. The family moved around a lot when he was growing up: Akron, Ohio, where he was born on April 14, 1920; Erie, Pa.; Buffalo; East Moline, Ill. His father was an executive with a number of machine and metal companies before moving on to New York City as a management consultant.

"Everything he did, he did until he mastered it," said St. Clair's father, Clinton, from South Yarmouth, Mass., where he and St. Clair's mother now live.

Mostly, things came easy for young St. Clair. "He could read vast amounts of material and remember it all," said his sister, Janice Brown of Riverside, Conn. "I was envious of that. I thought it made his life easier than mine. He was always a very quick student. He was a great debater in high school. By the time he was in college he was judging debates. There was a high premium placed on scholarship in our family."

Clinton St. Clair said his older son (the younger St. Clair son, David, is now counsel for the Thomas J. Lipton Co. in New Jersey) ranked in the top 10 per cent of his class at Augustana and the top quarter at the University of Illinois, where he completed his last two years before moving on to Harvard Law.

In his early years at Hale & Dorr, St. Clair was tutored by no less a personage than the colorful Welch. When Welch died in 1960 St. Clair assumed the firm's major trial work, steadily moving to the top rank of trial lawyers in Boston and beyond while gaining a reputation for taking on clients regardless of their political or ideological views.

From what he's seen already, assistant Watergate special prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste agrees with the general opinion that St. Clair's work is marked by a high order of distinction.

"Ah-ha," Ben-Veniste chuckled, when asked to appraise the President's new man. "I think he knows his way around the courtroom."