

John Dean — After 'Blind Ambition'

By Colin Dangaard
Special to The Chronicle

Watergate threw a president out of the White House, broke up marriages, sent people to jail and caused others to age quickly — but it seems to have been mainly good for John Dean.

Today, the man who blew the whistle on Richard Nixon's cover-up has finished a book destined for the best-seller list. He is writing screen plays for movies and television, doing special assignments for Rolling Stone and living in the best part of Hollywood.

Most of all, Watergate has made Dean a happy man at home, reviving his love for wife Maureen.

As he says: "We have a stronger marriage as a result of Watergate. Maybe it's the sort of thing a crisis can do to a marriage. We've got to know each other better, learnt to communicate more openly.

"Mo and I have been to the point where we didn't know how to pay for our next meal . . . or how long we would survive on borrowed time and borrowed money."

His book is called "Blind Ambition" — which pretty well describes John Dean when he was offered the job as President Nixon's personal counsel.

"I had plotted for the job," he says now. "I saw it as the first level of success, which I had reached much faster than I had anticipated. I figured I could only go to greater heights from there.

"Today, I am a lot happier. I'm not plotting. I live a day at a time and I'm enjoying it. I enjoy smelling the flowers . . . I never even saw flowers before.

"Life doesn't have near the problems it once had. Not that I don't want to do things. It's just that I have totally different goals and aims in life."

"Blind Ambition" will hit the stores in October. The fact that it's a Book of the Month Club selection practically guarantees it will be a huge seller.

Dean calls it a portrait of Watergate, seen from his own special position as insider and central figure.

"I take no cheap shots. I am no harder on anybody in the book than I am on myself. I try to offer clues as to how it all transpired.

"One thing I hope the book will



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do is stop revisionists coming forward with wild theories and deeper motivations.

"I show Richard Nixon the way I saw him. He is like a crossword puzzle where everybody who is working on it is given a different set of clues, but there are always one or two clues left out."

Generally he agrees with the picture of Nixon painted by reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's book "The Final Days." Looking back, he is also sympathetic.

"I can," he says, "very easily understand a man drinking un-

der those circumstances, or walking down the hall talking to pictures, I can see him on his knees asking Kissinger to pray with him.

"But my relationship with Nixon was much earlier. So I didn't see the same person. I was aware the man drank. But I never saw him out of hand, knee-walking drunk.

"I recall times when he seemed not able to follow conversations. I often had to repeat things I had told him days earlier. There were times when he was in complete control . . . and times when he seemed to be wandering."

Dean insists this was "preoccupation," not booze.

Dean liked Nixon. "I always found him very warm, very conscious of trying not to hurt people. He had great difficulty with confrontations. He avoided them.

"He was always asking me little personal questions, like, how was Mo, or if my office was fine. He appeared genuinely concerned.

"There are sides of him that I liked, and sides I didn't like. Today, I'm not sure I know who Nixon was."

Dean describes the cover-up as

for and about people



After Watergate and his testimony before the Senate investigators (below) John Dean said he and wife Maureen (far left) have a stronger marriage



"a living hell." "Every day," he says, "I was keeping all those balls in the air simultaneously. One of the oddest compliments I got through the whole Watergate period was when the special prosecutor said to me, 'John, as long as you were in charge of the cover-up, it didn't fall apart. We're glad you decided you didn't want to continue it.'"

Dean talks of his "great loneliness" during the time he was

giving evidence before the Senate committee investigating Watergate, before the White House tapes were revealed.

He realized it was his word against John Ehrlichman, H.R. Haldeman, John Mitchell and Richard Nixon. "I could see myself with 186 counts of perjury against me. It was four to one.

"But I knew what I was doing

was right. And most of all, I had the support of Mo. While she knew none of the facts, her instincts, for a total outsider, were so incredibly accurate on many situations that she annoyed me."

Dean says there was a clear 24 hours in which Nixon could have destroyed the incriminating tapes — the period between revelation and their subpoena by Congress and the courts.

He said he does not know what was erased from some of the vital tapes, nor who did it. But he speculates: "It was probably somebody who hadn't driven a car in a long time, wasn't mechanically adapted, who had trouble opening the drawer of his desk..."

President Nixon?

"Draw your own conclusions," he says.

Dean was in prison doing time for his cover-up actions, when President Ford pardoned former President Nixon.

Says Dean now: "I felt distressed although I knew that to put Nixon on trial would have drawn out the pain of Watergate for years. What really upset me was that Ford granted the pardon without asking Nixon to give any indications of what happened."

Dean said he feels no bitterness toward Nixon. "I happen to think that his administration did a lot of good things."

For Dean, writing the book was a painful 13-month experience. He raked over the coals of his conscience, and those of his friends.

"I wanted to be honest," he says, "not just with myself, but with others. I didn't want to moralize on an experience I would never want to go through again."

He also had "some sensitivity about commercializing on Watergate."

But he managed to resolve that. "After spending 13 months on a typewriter," he says, "I now want the book to sell just as well as it will."