

John Dean Hides AgainBlind Ambition: The White House Years. By John Dean. Simon & Schuster. 415 pp. \$11.95

By William Greider

In fairness to John Dean, it has to be said that many people despise him for the wrong reasons. He was the "rat" of the Watergate tumble-down at the Nixon White House. People do not like a "rat" even though history's debt to John Dean is profound. If he had not stepped up to the microphone and told all that was contained in his extraordinary memory, it is most likely that Richard Nixon would be finishing up his second

term right now, presiding grandly over the Bicentennial and the war in Indochina.

For other reasons, some of us resisted the popular notion that John Dean was some kind of constitutional hero. It was not the courage of his truth-telling which impressed us, but the easiness of it. Dean helped to construct all those cardboard lies which Nixon hid behind, then at the necessary moment he blew them over, with hardly a catch in his throat. Something seemed to be missing from the man.

Something seems to be missing from his book too. A decent grasp of the enormity of what he was doing, before and after. A moment's pause to explain himself, the conventional career which produced his own facile detachment from the lies he told, the crimes he witnessed. Or at least a frank discussion of his apparent inability to cope with these things about himself, his blind ambition.

Forget it. John Dean's book, like John Dean's behavior as White House counsel and later as chief witness against the President, clips along too fast from crisis to crisis to consider these slower and fuzzier questions about what happened to him.

Dean is a bright young lawyer who sticks to the facts of the case (or to the lies, depending upon the requirements of the moment). His story is told in the mentholated prose of best-selling thrillers: keep it moving, keep it sardonic, don't look back, quick, quick, quick. Turn the page and suck another lozenge.

Maybe somewhere in the English-speaking world there are readers who will still be held in suspense by the Watergate plot. If so, this book will give them an evening of engrossing titillation. Did the President actually say those ugly things? Were they really going to burn down the Brookings Institution? Smuggle whores into the

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Democratic Convention? Deep Six the Howard Hunt files? If those words and whispers are still startling to people—people who missed the public testimony before the Senate Watergate Committee, who never read the White House tapes or the House impeachment reports—then this book will thrill, a skillful retelling of the familiar story.

If the shock value of these revelations has worn off, you will find that John Dean's big book about Watergate offers rather thin stimulation. He goes through the plot line from his personal perspective, even the well-known dialogues in the Oval Office, and simply sketches in his visceral impressions of the moment, the inflection of someone's voice, Dean's private hunches about what the words meant.

This is mildly amusing. Dean, for

instance, had to listen to Nixon's nostalgia on the Alger Hiss case, which the President offered his aides as a primer for Watergate. Dean writes: "His constant analogies between the Hiss case and Watergate baffled me; I thought the President had everything backward. I identified with Hiss, not the investigators, and I winced whenever the President talked about how he had finally 'nailed' him."

Private bile does not paint a pretty picture, of course. As you might expect, nearly everyone inside the Nixon submarine turns out to be even uglier than we thought, more petty and deceitful.

But I think for \$11.95 one has a right to expect more from John Dean at this late point in time. Not shocking revelations of new crimes, but a few serious reflections on the old ones. Instead,

Dean moves us briskly from his power trip as a young scrambler in the White House, then to his criminal effectiveness in the cover-up, on to his tail-in-a-crack role as confessor and—whammo—John Dean is off to jail with a bunch of Mafia hoods.

The jail scenes are briefly interesting actually. He and Charles Colson and Herb Kalmbach and even Jeb Magruder put aside their White House antagonisms and share the ordeal of prison as friends. The Mafia hit men add a little garlic to the story. Dean's wife, Maureen, delivers a touch of humanity when she brings gifts to his cell—two potted plants, a rug and radio.

But just a touch, mind you. A few pages later, she is off in California having a nervous breakdown. John spends

(Continued on page N2)

(Continued from page N1)

the night vomiting. A few quick words about helpless guilt, then briskly we are taken back to the live action.

Maybe this is unfair to John Dean too, asking too much of him. Maybe this narrative with its keen eye for detail and weak sense of anything deeper is an authentic portrayal of the man, perhaps incapable of going deeper.

I don't think so. He is too bright, too experienced in the world to be so opaque. My hunch is that Dean's real thoughts flow on a much deeper level and he is, in a sense, still hiding from us behind this book. His recent article in Rolling Stone on the Republican Convention (the same one that undid Earl Butz) suggests as much. It engages playfully with the obvious irony of his role—John Dean the reporter covering the Republicans whom he helped to disgrace. He manages to be funny and offensive and even self-deflating. In short, the magazine article has a lot more flavor than this book. It hints at a much more complicated character than the young white-collar gangster driven by blind ambition.

Perhaps, in time, Dean can write about that person too. Skip the Oval Office anecdotes and insider gossip. Call it: "Inside Blind Ambition." □