

Books

Gadarene White House

Blind Ambition

by John Dean

Simon & Schuster, 415 pp., \$11.95

Reviewed by Garry Wills

He also spoke rapidly and hurriedly, but with assurance and without having to search for the right word. His thoughts were calmly formulated despite his hurried enunciation, and they had something precise and final about them that was very striking indeed. His articulation was remarkably clear—words poured out of him like small, even grains, carefully selected and always ready to serve. At first, the effect of this was pleasing, but after a while one began to feel uncomfortable over his too-perfect articulation and his smooth flow of ever-ready words. One began to imagine that the tongue in his mouth had something special about it, that it was very long and thin, very red, and exceptionally pointed, with a constantly flickering tip.

—description of Peter Verkhovensky in Dostoevski's *The Demons*

JOHN DEAN tells us, in *Blind Ambition*, how he trained himself to drone facts at the Ervin committee in a colorless way, fact-on-fact drilling at the targeted area, remorselessly mordant. He studied a tape of himself being interviewed by Walter Cronkite to screen out all expression or emphasis in his manner. Manner had to be sacrificed to matter—he had to agree to his being hated as a condition of his being believed. His lawyer made him cut all the “self-serving crap” from his testimony. His only chance of escaping the consequences of his guilt was to establish his guilt as part of his credibility. He had

Garry Wills is Washington Irving professor of modern literary and historical studies at Union College.

to study the role of the cool rat as he had studied, earlier, the role of ingratiating toady.

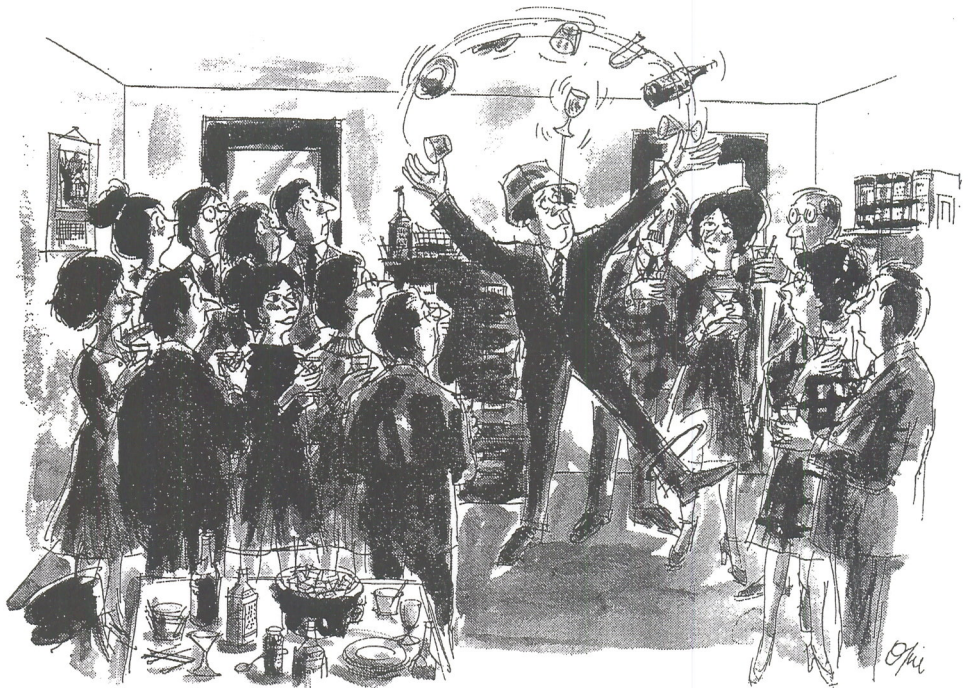
He shrewdly adheres to the same strategy in his book. The pages are alive with convincing details, observed through a cool, amoral lens—a lizard's-eye view of the slime. (The truly slimy thing about Joseph Alsop's sustained campaign against Dean as a “bottom-dwelling slug” was that Alsop launched it to save all the larger slugs Dean moved among.) As usual Dean has gauged his audience well. The book works brilliantly. Just compare it with the fluffy preening of his wife's book to see how wise was his choice.

Dean was always good at pleasing the constituency he worked for. If he works now at the image of having no image—I am an ultrared camera in this abyss—we know he has practiced before the mirror almost as much as his wife did. He just chooses his target and ammunition more

shrewdly. His candor is obviously artful, without losing its edge. His very self-centeredness involves constant outward attention—he needs to know all the incriminating things about himself, and admit them, to incriminate others and make himself too useful for us to dispense with him. The tricks he played on Nixon he now plays on us, and we, no more than Nixon, can do without him. Nixon needed him to establish his innocence. We need him to establish Nixon's guilt. Dean has given up all hope of being loved. He will settle for being needed.

The book has an evil fascination to it precisely because it is so patently true. Only partially true, of course, as all men's grasp of their own case must be—but Dean tried to serve Nixon with far less ample truths, and his account will sink the plausibility of any Nixon memoir. It is the strange trick of Dean to make one feel soiled by the truth, to use fact as a nasty weapon. At one point Dean, trameled in his own cover-up ideas and trying to cut his losses, compares himself to Raskolnikov, impelled toward an act he can neither will nor *not* will. This may be a bit pretentious, but the claustrophobic world Dean recreates is Dostoevskian, a place of genial buffoons and destructive innocents, all of whom have breathed each other's air too long.

Dean welcomed Watergate as he had welcomed, earlier, the threat of demon-



“These office parties really bring out the inner person, don't they?”

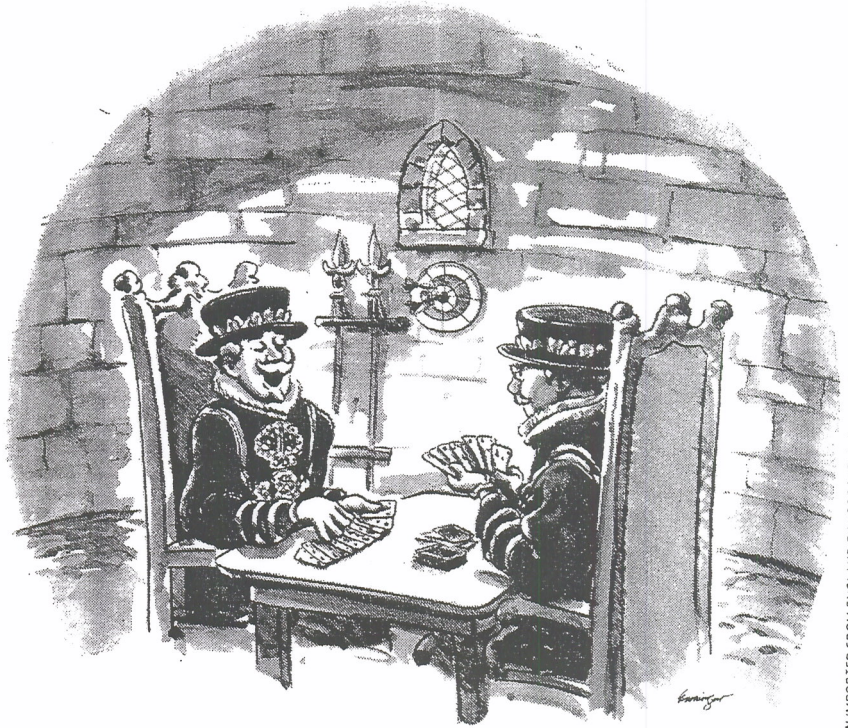
strators' violence around the White House. "Mayday" was an excuse for Dean to aggrandize his position and to make his office a control center for intelligence on the "enemy," to crank out reports that magnified his own past role and future importance in containing this great threat. Such empire-building is the story of many government programs. It is impossible to tell whether Dean thought radicals really posed a threat of disruption. It hardly matters. He would have acted the same way no matter what he thought. He was feeding the delusions of his masters, putting himself at their disposal in order to have them at his disposal later on. It might even be better if the threat were to evaporate. He would have them at a disadvantage over their embarrassment if the truth came out.

That was the kind of training that made Dean seize on Watergate as his big opportunity. Despite his fancy title, Counsel to the President, he rarely entered the Oval Office—the true *penetrable* for his coolly erotic power drive. He was really a glorified errand boy for Haldeman and Ehrlichman, a prize they had wrested from John Mitchell in the constant vicious battle over pawns. Watergate changed all that. The lower rats were scurrying; they needed legal advice—and Dean's office had the resources they could call on. Dean welcomed these troubled people, hoping to bank up all their troubles as his own investment. He became the center of the first, lower-level cover-up before he knew exactly how much there was to be covered up. His own hope was to form a network of flunkies beholden to him, in a long-range blackmail scheme inseparable from ordinary politics in the Executive Office Building.

And in time it looked as if Haldeman and Ehrlichman might come within his power, too—and they were too big a catch to be handled safely. They would make him the catcher caught. Already he had begun to realize that each step deeper into the cover-up gave out as many hostages as it gathered—he began to want out. But, ironically, the fulfillment of his hopes now rose to block him. The door to the President's office finally swung open, and left him no exit. If you would curse a man, just answer his prayers.

The President grappled Dean to him, and Dean tried to smile and ignore the fact that it was a death grip. Nixon sounded him out, encouraging, giving oblique nods to further payments of hush money, wondering how much Dean knew and how far he would go—and how, if the need arose,

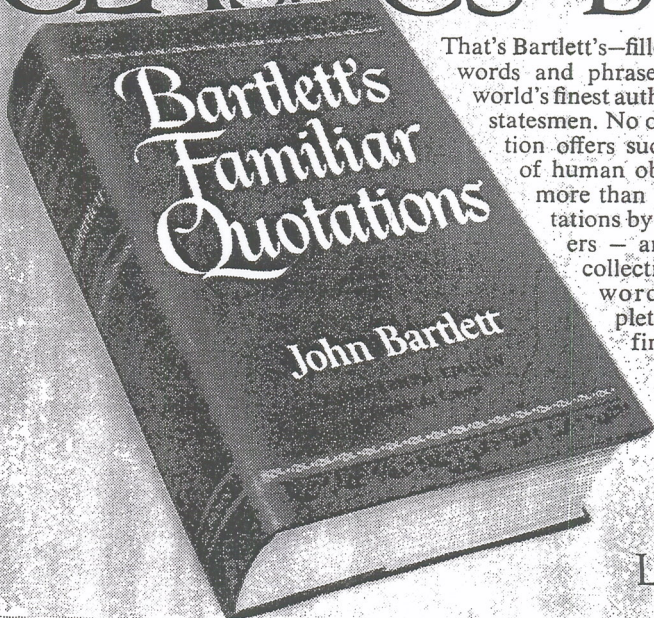
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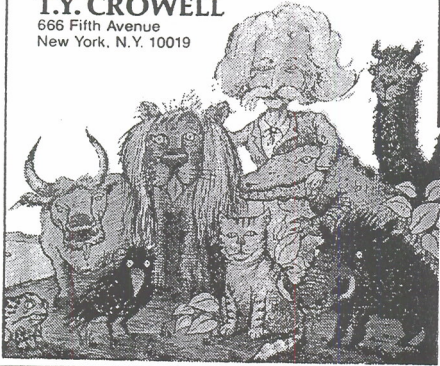
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he could be set up as another patsy, after Mitchell and the others. Dean soon realized what game was being played on him. It was the same game he had played on others, farther down. Even Dean could not believe at first that the President himself preyed on enemies, not certain who was an enemy, thus forcing enmity on everyone.

But Dean was given room to maneuver precisely because he came in so deep so late. A Haldeman or Ehrlichman could not cut and run. Probably Dean could not either, but he was willing to try. He knew he was caught in a kill-or-be-killed situation with the President of the United States, and the longer he stayed with him the worse the (already overwhelming) odds became. The cool decision to cut took deep reserves of gall. Dean was totally alone. His wife—a decorative adjunct, like his Porsche—was useless in this struggle. No allies could be sought in the White House, where every alliance was a snare, an attempt to implicate as a means of mutual protection. Dean sought the best lawyer he could find—Charles Schaffer, who becomes the rather pompous comic hero of this tale—to bargain him out of the President's embrace, so long sought but now recognized as the kiss of death.

**E**HRlichman had thought up the idea of a Dean report on the Watergate break-in, and Nixon desperately used the idea in a press conference before Dean was even told about it. The report was designed for several presidential uses. If Dean confessed his own actions, that would put him at the mercy of the Oval Office schemers, who might fire or discredit him before he could tell his larger story and bargain for grace. But if he lied about his activities, that would allow the President later on to plead ignorance and say, "My own lawyer lied to me when I asked him to investigate."

Dean's fate now depended on his finding a way to turn the Dean report against its inventors. He had to pretend to be working on it while he bought time and opened escape routes. The President could not very well fire him until he had in his hand the precious report so many things now depended on. Dean needed to keep the project alive as desperately as he needed never to finish it.

Nixon was tempted to go along with the stall, since he was using the Dean report as his own excuse for not cooperating with outside investigations. Much as he wanted Dean's piece of paper as an insurance

policy, he found it convenient to say the investigation was still under way. By the kind of reversal happening daily in that White House, each weapon was a danger to its wielder. A circle of deadly intimates had pulled the pins on individual hand grenades, and each was calculating to the minisecond just when he had to give it a toss.

Only when he was forced to go to Camp David to complete his report did Dean hire an outside lawyer by telephone. He knew he could not stall much longer—though he kept commuting from the prosecutors to the cover-up team for a while. Haldeman and the others were no longer friendly. Dean seemed to be kept on in order to be observed. (He misses one obvious point here. He notes that the White House people were not surprised when he said he had a lawyer, or even when he said he had gone to the prosecutors. He seems to overlook the fact that he called his lawyer from Camp David. One of the reasons, very likely, that he was sent there was so his conversations and phone calls could be easily recorded.)

So they all nudged each other toward a mutual fate, setting each other up, taping and bugging reciprocally, helping in ways that undermined, welcoming today's co-

conspirator in the hope that he might be tomorrow's scapegoat. The place was thick with melodrama no one but Dean seems calculating enough to have observed in any detail. This is not the story of Raskolnikov but of Peter Verkhovensky in *The Demons*, the compulsive plotter who tries to outscheme God as a way of proving He does not exist. Dean, it is true, did not arrange a murder simply to put all those implicated in it at his mercy. In that sense, he is a two-bit Verkhovensky. But Dean did welcome the Watergate crimes as a way of using official criminals for his own advancement, and his shameless skill at this desperate game evokes the same admiration, on a technical level, that Peter's does.

It will be remembered that Dostoevski took the title for *The Demons* (or *The Demoniacs*) from the Gospel story of the Gadarene swine. In Mark's version of that tale, when the possessor is forced to yield up his name (and thus his power), he confesses: "My name is Mob, for I am many." The story tells how dithery multiple self-defeating strengths in a single man expend themselves down the porcine huddle toward the sea. Dean gives us a modern pig's-eye view of the slop in Gadara—not a pretty sight, but a scary and useful one. ©

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